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C O N F I D E N T I A L DAMASCUS 000318

SIPDIS

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NEA/ELA; NSC FOR MARCHESE;

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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [SY](#)

SUBJECT: KURDS PEACEFULLY CELEBRATE NAH RUZ

REF: A. 06 DAMASCUS 01058

[1](#)B. 06 DAMASCUS 01297

[1](#)C. DAMASCUS 00308

CLASSIFIED BY: CDA MICHAEL CORBIN FOR REASONS 1.4 B/D

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: KURDS IN SYRIA HELD PEACEFUL CELEBRATIONS OF THE ANCIENT PERSIAN HOLIDAY OF NAH RUZ, THE SOLAR NEW YEAR ON MARCH 21-22 IN VARIOUS AREAS OF THE COUNTRY. UNLIKE IN SOME PREVIOUS YEARS, THE SYRIAN PRESS WAS QUIET ON THE EVENT, AND THE CELEBRATIONS PASSED WITHOUT REPORTS OF VIOLENCE OR OVERT SECURITY SERVICE SUPPRESSION OF KURDISH ELEMENTS, EVEN IN THE MORE TENSE NORTHEASTERN SECTION OF THE COUNTRY. DESPITE THIS, REPORTING IN OTHER CHANNELS SHOWS THE SARG IS INCREASINGLY CONCERNED ABOUT THE KURDISH GROUPS AND MOVING TO EXTEND THEIR MONITORING OF THEM. END SUMMARY.

[1](#)2. (U) THERE ARE APPROXIMATELY 1.5 MILLION KURDS IN SYRIA, ROUGHLY 7 PERCENT OF SYRIA'S TOTAL POPULATION. UP TO 350,000 OF THESE KURDS WERE STRIPPED OF THEIR CITIZENSHIP IN THE 1960'S BY THE SARG AND THE LIST OF DISCRIMINATORY POLICIES AGAINST KURDS REMAINS LONG (REF A). (NOTE: THE SYRIAN BA'ATHISTS WHO HAVE RUN SYRIA SINCE THE EARLY 1960'S HAVE ALWAYS INSISTED ON THE ARABIST IDEOLOGY, A KEY PLANK OF WHICH DISTINGUISHES KURDS FROM ARABS AND DEFINES THEM AS OUTSIDERS. END NOTE). NEVERTHELESS, SYRIAN KURDS WERE ALLOWED TO PARTICIPATE IN A VARIETY OF KURDISH NEW YEAR,S "NAH RUZ" CELEBRATIONS THROUGHOUT THE COUNTRY OVER MARCH 20-21. (NOTE: THE EVENT MARKS THE START OF SPRING AND COINCIDES WITH THE SYRIAN PUBLIC HOLIDAY OF MOTHER,S DAY. END NOTE)

[1](#)3. (C) KURDISH CONTACTS REPORT THAT UP TO 100,000 KURDS GATHERED AROUND THE NORTHEAST CITY OF QAMISHLI TO CELEBRATE THE HOLIDAY WITH FESTIVALS BOASTING POPULAR KURDISH TROUPES. KURDISH LEADERS FROM MANY OF THE MAJOR KURDISH GROUPS ATTENDED, INCLUDING THE KURDISH PROGRESSIVE DEMOCRATIC PARTY, THE KURDISH YIKITI PARTY, THE KURDISH FUTURE MOVEMENT, THE KURDISH AZADI PARTY, AND THE DEMOCRATIC UNION PARTY. ALTHOUGH THE SARG HAS BEEN MORE ACTIVE IN SUPPRESSING CELEBRATIONS SINCE THE 2004 QAMISHLI RIOTS THAT LEFT 25 KILLED, HUNDREDS WOUNDED, AND THOUSANDS ARRESTED, THERE WERE NO PRESS REPORTS THAT VIOLENCE OCCURRED THIS YEAR. THERE WERE, HOWEVER, SCATTERED REPORTS FROM KURDISH CONTACTS OF ARABS STONING KURDISH PARTICIPANTS IN THE NORTHEAST, NEAR HASSAKE, IN FULL VIEW OF THE SYRIAN SECURITY WHICH DID NOTHING TO INTERVENE. MOREOVER, THE SARG USED THE STRATEGIC LOCATION OF ITS MAIN HEADQUARTERS FOR SYRIAN MILITARY FORCES IN THE REGION (ON THE ROAD TO THE REGULARLY USED KURDISH FESTIVAL SITE) TO REDIRECT CARS AND CREATE LONG AND ARDUOUS DELAYS FOR MANY OF THE PARTICIPANTS (REF B).

14. (SBU) FOLK FESTIVALS WERE ALSO HELD THROUGHOUT DAMASCUS, BOTH IN UNIVERSITIES, AS WELL AS OUTLYING SUBURBS SUCH AS QURAT AL-ASAD. EMBOFFS ATTENDED ONE KURDISH GATHERING OF SEVERAL THOUSAND PEOPLE ON MARCH 21 HELD IN A POORER KURDISH DISTRICT OF DAMASCUS CALLED RUKNEDDIN. THERE WAS A MARKED SOCIO-ECONOMIC DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE LOCATION OF THIS FESTIVAL, WITH ITS SQUATTER FARMS, AND THE NEARBY HIGH-RISE CONDOMINIUMS OF DOWNTOWN DAMASCUS. THE GATHERING WAS PEACEFUL, WITH MOST PEOPLE SIMPLY EATING AND LISTENING TO MUSIC IN FAMILY GROUPS. MANY OF THE KURDS GATHERED FOR THE EVENT WORE TRADITIONAL KURDISH CLOTHING, AS WELL AS SCARVES AND HATS IN THE COLORS OF THE KURDISH FLAG: YELLOW, GREEN, AND RED. ONE AREA OF THE FESTIVAL DID HOST MUSIC AND A POLITICAL RALLY OF SORTS, WITH MANY PARTICIPANTS HOLDING KURDISH FLAGS AND SIGNS REPRESENTING VARIOUS KURDISH GROUPS, INCLUDING FOR THE PKK-AFFILIATED DEMOCRATIC UNION. THE CROWD WAS ALSO INCITED BY THOSE ON STAGE TO CHANT FOR KURDISH LEADER ABDULLAH OCALAN, AND HIS PICTURE WAS PREDOMINATELY DISPLAYED - THERE WAS A MUCH SMALLER PICTURE OF SYRIAN PRESIDENT ASAD. THOSE GATHERED WERE ALSO SPEAKING THE KURDISH LANGUAGE, WHICH IS OFFICIALLY BANNED IN SYRIA. EMBOFFS NOTICED BOTH A SMALL OVERT SYRIAN SECURITY PRESENCE AND A LARGER COVERT SECURITY PRESENCE. NEVERTHELESS, THE SECURITY SEEMED TO BE MONITORING THE EVENT, RATHER THAN TRYING TO INTERFERE. SYRIAN SECURITY DID INTERVENE TO STOP PROMINENT SUNNI POLITICAL DISSIDENT RIAD SEIF FROM SPEAKING AT AN EVENT IN DAMASCUS, BRIEFLY TAKING HIM INTO CUSTODY (REF C).

15. (C) COMMENT: THE EVENTS SURROUNDING NAH RUZ DID NOT HAVE THE SAME OVERT POLITICAL FERVOR AS IN YEARS PAST WHEN VIOLENCE SOMETIMES OCCURRED, BUT THE ONGOING CELEBRATIONS OF KURDISH FOLKLIFE DEMONSTRATE THE CONTINUED STRENGTH OF THE KURDISH IDENTITY IN SYRIA. THE KURDS ALSO APPEAR TO HAVE SOME LIMITED ROOM FOR POLITICAL MANEUVER AND CULTURAL EXPRESSION. NEVERTHELESS, DESPITE THE PEACEFUL NATURE OF THE

NAH RUZ EVENTS, SECURITY SERVICE PRESENCE WAS A CLEAR REMINDER TO PARTICIPANTS THAT THEY ARE BEING MONITORED AND WOULD BE SUBJECT TO REPRISALS IF THEY STEP OVER THE LINE.
CORBIN